

HOWARD COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes (approved, Dec. 15, 2008)

Monthly Meeting

December 8, 2008

Chairperson Mary Kay Sigaty called the monthly meeting to order 12:29 p.m. on December 8, 2008, in the C. Vernon Gray Conference Room, 8930 Stanford Boulevard, Columbia.

Members present on call to order: Calvin Ball, Greg Fox, Mary Kay Sigaty Jen Terrasa and Courtney Watson.

Ms. Watson reported on the Capital for a Day program held in Ellicott City on December 4. She commended the Administration for the initiative, calling it good for the economy. She urged residents to patronize local merchants and restaurants in the difficult economy.

Ms. Sigaty reported that the Chair of the Patuxent River Commission is suing, as an individual, the Environmental Protection Agency, for lack of progress in cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. She said that the Patuxent River Commission will discuss this at their next meeting.

Ms. Terrasa reported that the Student Physical Fitness Task Force completed its work. She has a copy of the report for review by anyone interested. She also reminded members that the MACo budget would be voted on January 8 and that the winter conference will be held in January.

Mr. Fox said that the National Association of Counties' (NACo) forum on energy independence will be held in Baltimore this week. He will attend.

Ms. Watson summarized the letter just received from the Attorney General's office, which affirmed Howard County's right to specify that there must be a disclosure that people circulating a petition are paid. This provision was passed in CB 77-2007, and it was challenged by people who are petitioning legislation concerning zoning in Turf Valley to the ballot.

Sheila Tolliver, Council Administrator, and Haskell Arnold, County Auditor, gave reports of the activities of the Council and Audit offices. Mr. Arnold reported that the fraud, waste and abuse hotline has been activated, and three reports have been made. He also reported that the auditors missed the November filing deadline for the Annual Audit.

Ray Wacks, Budget Director, updated the Council on revenues and expenditures. He reported that the income tax receipts from 2007 received with the 3rd quarter revenues showed a 13% increase. The 3rd quarter revenues from income tax for 2008 increased 1.9%, consistent with the revenue projections as revised after the budget was approved. He said that the State will release new revenue estimates on December 16. The third assessment area of the County will receive updated property assessments at the end of December.

Mr. Fox asked whether or not the Administration might consider reprogramming some of the grant funds set aside for Healthy Howard for use by other non-profit organizations, given the smaller than expected demand for Healthy Howard services.

There followed a discussion of the effect of the budget constraints on the Fire Department and its reaccreditation process. Ray Wacks explained that the Administration is holding 18 sworn officer vacancies and one other vacancy. However, they anticipate beginning and list and holding a training class in the summer, as it is more cost effective to keep the positions filled than to pay overtime. Chief Herr outlined some efficiencies in training that the Department has undertaken to cut training time and costs. Council members emphasized that they do not want to compromise public safety.

In response to a question about the fire tax, Mr. Wacks reported that he anticipates no changes this year. The Administration is waiting for the completion of the standard of coverage study.

The Council reviewed a summary of additions and subtractions suggested for the FY 2010 budget request and outlined some policy issues related to the budget. The Council asked for additional information about the Constant Contact program suggested by the Information Technology Department to manage e-mailings. They also asked for details about the number of zoning cases heard before comprehensive rezoning. They asked the Administrator to explore the possibility of having the Administration cover the cost of use of the Board of Education facility for Council meetings as part of its budget for functions formerly covered by the Government Television office. The Council will review a more detailed budget proposal in January, when the request will be on the agenda for approval.

The Council discussed the possibility of using consultants for their review of the Columbia Plan. Ms. Watson said that she thinks an economic analysis or an economic impact on the county analysis would be helpful, particularly if the plan includes proposed tax incremental financing (TIF).

Ms. Sigaty reviewed the schedule of hearings by the Planning Board and suggested that the Council would be unlikely to want to schedule its review until after they complete the budget in May.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:40 p.m.